

Book Review

From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and American's Future, Aronowitz, Stanley
(Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998 246 pp. \$25.00)

reviewed by Charles T. Joyce†

Labor History is far too seldom employed to illuminate a path for the present. Static studies of the struggles of Massachusetts shoemakers in the mid-19th Century, or of collective bargaining during World War II, as interesting as they are, unfortunately resonate little on the modern shop floor or in the union hall. Stanley Aronowitz's *From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and America's Future* provides a refreshing exception. It skillfully weaves the small triumphs, dashed opportunities, and abject defeats of the American Labor Movement's past into object lessons that unions and their leaders should heed to halt and reverse the last quarter century of decline.

Arguing that the labor movement remains the only vehicle to challenge "capitalist dominance of every itch and scratch of American life," Aronowitz sees cause for hope if today's labor chieftains take critical stock of the successes and mistakes of their forebearers. He begins in the summer of 1946 when unions, at the peak of their power and frustrated by wage stagnation in the face of unrestrained post war corporate profits, staged massive strikes across a broad spectrum of the economy, representing "the largest outpouring of militant workers in any one year in American History." Labor, however, paid dearly for this momentary muscle flexing. A congressional backlash in 1947 spawned the restrictive Taft-Hartley Amendments to the National Labor Relations Act (passed, Aronowitz dryly notes, with many Democratic votes and over the feeble veto efforts of President Truman, who had himself grouched openly about "labor's inordinate power"). Internally, the Labor Movement also reeled from this moment, as its captains chose to live with the limitations of labor law, including legalization of the use of replacement workers and "right to

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work" laws, convinced that by doing all in their power to insure industrial peace and promote capital growth, they could make and maintain a "social contract" with Corporate America that would allow its members to enjoy an ever rising standard of living even if their relative portion of the economic pie did not increase. This approach led Labor, in Aronowitz's opinion, to mistakenly fix its focus upon contract administration and quelling shop floor militancy, and to even embrace the two-tiered wage system to protect the pay of existing members. The "task of organizing the unorganized" he laments, "often became a marginalized occupation reserved to staffers to whom the leadership owed political debts."

Thus, unions were institutionally ill-equipped to weather the harsh hike in prices, stagnation of wages, and ascendancy of the multinational corporations that marked the economic end of the "American Century" by 1973. Buffeted throughout the 1980s by job displacement created by capital flight and automation, placed on the defensive in the hostile political climate fostered by successive "pro-business" political administrations from Ford to Clinton, unions now stand witness to an America which features a degree of income inequality greater than any advanced industrial society on earth, "due", in Aronowitz's view, "mainly to the erosion of trade union power rather than to some mysterious market mechanism."

Regardless of whether one accepts Aronowitz's thesis that the decline of labor unions presaged a decline, for most Americans, in real income and standards of living, it is hard to argue with his observation that "[a]s long as people procure their livelihood by working for wages and salaries, they will recognize, sooner or later, the futility of appealing to their employers as individuals." His recommendations for a labor renaissance, therefore, are worthy of more than passing scrutiny.

Aronowitz argues that to effect a more sustained resurgence (beyond its recent success in the UPS strike), Organized Labor must summon the will to make two fundamental changes: first, it must pour resources and attention toward massive membership recruitment in several major geographic and/or occupational areas—the South, among white collar clericals and professional and technical employees, and the working poor. Second, unions must reduce their dependence on and allegiance to the Democratic Party if they wish to participate more effectively in partisan politics. These are not new prescriptions. But what sets this game plan for renewal apart from the nostrums of other commentators is, again, Aronowitz's ability to mine Labor's past to provide guidance for its future.

Historically, Labor's forays in the South, Aronowitz observes, were narrow and half-hearted. Its three-year "Operation Dixie" organizing drive (1946-1949) was notable for its limitations in range and vision; it generally targeted only the textiles industry, displayed reluctance to address larger

social issues of racial inequality, and failed to embrace local institutions of communication and potential support, such as churches and small, marginalized shopkeepers. Moreover, southern organizing was never much more than an attempt to retard business efforts to relocate northern industrial concerns to a "union-free" South; in the end, Labor was more concerned with protecting the jobs of its existing members in the "rust belt" than with effectively expanding its message to sun belt workers. However, with the South now the fastest growing region in the national economy (and containing the largest section of non-union labor), unions can no longer afford to tread so gingerly there.

Similarly, with regard to organizing white collar and professional employees, Aronowitz points out that the theory that such workers were too closely aligned with "management" to make good union members became the prevailing view among top union leaders, blunting promising early efforts to form combinations of office and professional workers and architects, chemists and engineers in the 1930s. As a result, the labor movement "permitted its detractors to announce boldly that, though unions may be appropriate for factory workers and badly paid blue collar service workers, they have no place in the office." But, with clerical employees now occupying one out of every six jobs in the country, and with "professionals" enjoying less and less control over both their income and conditions of work, Aronowitz believes not only that Labor must reach out to these occupational groups, but also that they may, now, be receptive to workplace combinations.

Unfortunately, other than to argue that the statutory exclusions to supervisory unionism contained in the National Labor Relations Act be abolished,¹ Aronowitz's only persistent advice to Unions seeking to organize Southern workers and white collar and professional employees is to have faith and courage to devote hitherto unprecedented sums of money to organizing campaigns, with little hope or expectation for immediately foreseeable results. The problem with this approach is that labor organizations, like any other American institution, are influenced by the prevailing ethos of corporate capitalism, where investment generally is measured by a yard stick of short term profit. Ironically but understandably, one could envision labor leaders growing impatient if resources devoted to organizing in these areas fail to generate new members in quick order.

Likewise regarding the goal of organizing the "working poor",

1. Sections 2(3) and 2(11) of the National Labor Relations Act, as amended by Taft-Hartley in 1947, exclude "supervisors" from the definition of "employee" entitled to legal protection to organize and form labor organizations. See 29 U.S.C. § 152(2)(11) (1994). Section 14(a) of the Taft-Hartley Amendments allows employers to treat supervisors as individuals exempt from the Act's coverage. See 29 U.S.C. § 164(a) (1994).

Aronowitz's plea that Labor attempt to reconnect with the vision of itself as a "transforming social movement", using as a model the message and tactics of Ceasar Chavez's United Farm Workers, would require the union movement both to make uneasy alliances with "radical intellectuals, activists, and community groups that may have ideologies and values different" from its membership, and to tamp down the impulse of its rank and file to attain an upper middle class lifestyle. This, as a matter of practical reality, may simply be too much of a reach for the American labor movement, as presently constituted. When Aronowitz writes, with perfect seriousness, that "[p]erhaps the main problem [with trade unionism] is labor's eagerness to become part of the middle class," he displays a certain degree of naivete and perhaps unfairly takes on the "American Dream" of striving for something better than from whence one came.

This nagging sense of unreality also somewhat dilutes the impact of Aronowitz's concluding chapters on Labor and American Politics. Although he argues convincingly that Labor's steady slow dance with the Democratic Party, beginning with its first presidential endorsement in 1912, has produced at best a spotty and at times unproductive record of results (especially in the last twenty years, with Democratic initiatives on trucking deregulations and NAFTA resulting in the loss of many union jobs), Aronowitz's proposal that unions consider withdrawing altogether from National partisan politics to devote more resources to organizing, would seem to merely open the way for an even more "pro-business" Congress and federal judiciary to craft and interpret federal labor policy. Better is Aronowitz's criticism of Labor's inexplicable hesitancy to mount a sustained public relations campaign in media and educational institutions, and among their own membership, which sometimes displays a bewildering tendency to vote contrary to its *economic* interests. Unfortunately left out from Aronowitz's discussion, however, is Labor's need to educate its members on the protections and the limitations of labor law. Too often workers either hesitate to take decisive action because they are unaware of their legal rights, or jump precipitously in the mistaken view that there "must be a law" in place to cushion their fall. In either case, their lack of knowledge can be severely self-defeating, both in the realm of their individual employment rights and in the arena of collective action.

These mild problems aside, Aronowitz's unsparing vision is commendable because it is almost infectiously optimistic. While he bemoans an American public "no longer repelled by revelations of boundless individual wealth and outsized corporate profits," he sees with some confidence an organized labor movement mobilizing to alter this complacency, and impart a measure of equilibrium and equality to our market economy.